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ABSTRACT

The role of the reader in how the meaning of a text is formed has been a nearly obsessive concern of recent critical thought. While theories of reader-response or deconstruction may seem to have had little effect on the practice of teaching literature, they do hold much in common with the way many teachers try to teach writing. The works of Roland Barthes and William Coles present theories on how to teach students to write effectively. Both men are preoccupied with the intertwining of language and the self, with the ways our sense of who we are is not only expressed by but also composed in our language. There are in the teaching of writing two common approaches to the question of style. One associates style with proper usage and trivializes it; the other equates style with integrity and sanctimonizes it. Barthes and Coles offer us a view of style based on neither correctness nor sincerity but on complexity. They show us the dialectic of writing and the self. We are what our language makes of us, and what we can make of our language. (DF)

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THE PLURAL TEXT/THE PLURAL SELF:

Roland Barthes and William Coles

The role of the reader in how the meaning of a text is formed has been a nearly obsessive concern of recent critical thought. Books and articles abound taking one stand or the other on the question of where meaning lies: in the text, in the reader, in the intertext, in the intentions of the author, in the practice of interpretive communities, and so on. For the most part, such talk tends to be seen, I think, as a kind of elegant diversion--the stuff of graduate seminars and doctoral theses--somewhat removed from the more pratical tasks of teaching our students to read intelligently and to write with conviction. And, certainly, things seem to go on pretty much as they always have in most classes on literature--that is, texts get assigned to be read and papers to be written, students plow more or less dutifully through both, some haggling over meanings and grades takes place, and students and teachers alike go home at the end of the term, having "done" Shakespeare, or the Seventeenth Century, or the Modern

Novel. The writings of Jacques Derrida and Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish haven't changed that, and I doubt that any theory of reading ever can or will.

But while theories of reader-response or deconstruction may seem to have had little effect on the practice of teaching literature, they do hold much in common with how many of us try to teach writing. The reasons for this are fairly plain. The meanings of most texts read in literature classes really are pretty stable--not because they hold some sort of intrinsic meanings, but simply because they're familiar works which we, as a community of readers at the university, have long agreed on how to go about interpreting. This isn't the case, though, when we read student writing. Then we are faced with texts which are both new to us and whose meanings have often not yet been wholly fixed even in the minds of their authors. In a course on freshman composition the instability of meaning is a fact of life, not a point of critical debate. Similarly, nowhere is the importance of a reader's expectations, of interpretive codes, shown more clearly than in the writing class. Where we look for analysis, our students often appeal to emotion; where we expect example, they call on popular sentiment, cliches, what everybody knows. The

problem is not that our students are dumb, but that they're not yet members of the club--they don't know the sorts of things we as academics look for when we read. Indeed, the job of the freshman writing teacher can be seen as introducing his students to the kinds of talk that go on in the university, as helping them enter the community of academic discourse.

It's thus ironic, but also a sign of the power of such thinking, that theories of the indeterminacy of meaning should arise from the study of precisely those texts--literary works--whose meanings are the most stable. The teacher of literature, concerned as he most often is with the interpreting of the Canon of Great Works of Art, works in the mainstream of language, with those texts which are most familiar and central to our culture. As teachers of writing, though, we are concerned with the frames and margins of discourse--with what makes sense and what doesn't, with what is good writing and what isn't. Why does this student's argument fall apart while this other's doesn't? Why is the meaning I get from this text so unlike that intended by its author? Or why is it so difficult to make some texts mean much of anything at all? Such questions are the focus and bane of any good teacher of

writing. They are also the same issues as those raised--in far more sweeping terms--by critical debates over the autonomy of the text and the locus of meaning.

The works of Roland Barthes and William Coles form a case in point. In temperament the two could not be less alike. Barthes was a kind of literary epicure whose interests and prose style often seemed willfully obscure, high flown, speculative. He was much taken by ideas and theories, but in a playful rather than methodical way, and his last and most provocative writings are purposely unsystematic, fragmented. More than anything, Barthes was the advocate of reading as a form of pleasure, whose aim was not so much to interpret the text as a coherent whole as to seek out jolts of meaning--isolated moments of brilliance or intensity. The characteristic stance of Coles, on the other hand, is blunt, hard-nosed, straightforward. Where Barthes was flamboyant, arcane, Coles is direct. Far from appealing to an aesthetic of pleasure, his focus is ethical. While Barthes interests and writings swung capriciously from the classics to fashion to mass culture to the noveau romain, Coles has devoted his career almost soley to the teaching of writing. And even there, he is reluctant to theorize--insisting instead that the teaching of writing, like writing

itself, centers on the forming of a personal style which, if it could be described in general terms, would no longer be personal.

But while much, then, separates the French aesthete from the American moralist, the concerns that link them run far deeper. Both Barthes and Coles are preoccupied with the intertwining of language and the self, with the ways our sense of who we are is not only expressed by but composed in our language. And both are much concerned with the problem of individuality, with what it means to have a style, a voice, with how a writer can indeed manage to use language in ways that set him apart from the pack, that are specific to him alone.

To show how these concerns distinguish them from much other thinking about writing I'll have to backtrack briefly. Most books on writing tend to make much of sincerity. Be yourself, they tell the writer. Write about what you really know, in a voice that's your own. Style is the man himself; it rests not on artifice but truth. So don't aim for a style, put on airs, or you'll risk the chance of ever gaining one. For real eloquence is honesty; the best prose is the most natural.

The problem with such a view is that it reduces writing to a simple test of integrity: Either your guts are out there on the page or they're not. It's easy to see, then, why so many students are baffled or intimidated when we ask them to write about what they really know. For what do they really know? What do they do if their sense of the world and their place in it is yet--as it perhaps should be--uncertain, undefined? Seen this way, the advice to be yourself starts to seem dogmatic, bullying, for it assumes that the writer already has a self somewhere, ready-made, that he merely needs to make his prose reflect and express. Similarly, the advice to write in your own voice doesn't so much solve as restate the problem for most writers, which is: How do I form a voice to write in?

Both Barthes and Coles argue against a romantic view of the self as an essence--whole, unchanging, apart from the shifts of thought and language. Rather, they suggest that it is only language that makes an awareness of self possible, that without language we could not have introspection. As Coles writes in Teaching Composing: "He with his languages is who he is, I with mine am I" (1974, p. 108). Writing is not simply a tool we use to express a self which we already have, it's the means by which we form a

self to express. For Barthes and Coles, then, the fullness of our sense of self hinges upon the density and richness of the language which forms and reveals it. What they thus value in any writing is complexity, the opening up of as many kinds and levels of meaning as possible.

Barthes and Coles reject the idea of the self as a fixed wordless core in order to advance a view of it and the text as irreducibly plural. For Barthes the goal of the reader became not the uncovering of some single correct interpetation of a work, but the freeing of as many varied and even conflicting meanings as the text might suggest. For Coles, the aim of the writer is no longer the Clarity and Simplicity of composition textbooks, but the creating of a text which suggests something of the complexity of its author.

For both, the voice of a writer is always a weaving of other voices; the self is seen not as an isolated whole but as an amalgam of other selves, voices, experiences. The image of the text that Barthes continually returns to is that of a network, "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages. . . which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony" (1977, p.

160). But if the text--which is, after all, only the tracing of the thoughts and voices of its author--is this complex, then how much more so must be the self which composed it or which now reads it? And so Barthes writes in S/Z: "This 'I' which approaches the text is itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost" (1974, p.10). Later, he goes on to picture the self as a wake or wash of codes--a fluid melding of voices and languages. Such images recall Coles' insistence that the self of the writer is a plural I, "an individual whose independence is conditioned by its new and free acknowledgement of its dependence--on both the self from which it came and on the rest of us as well" (1978, p. 270).

None of this denies the idea of individuality. Barthes, particularly, has been accused of a kind of anti-humanism, of, in the words of one critic, reducing the self to "merely a collection of patterned forces" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 172). But this sort of reading is reductive. What is really happening is that one idea of the self is being changed for another. For Barthes and Coles the question of style is still one of individuality. But both see that individuality not as something each of us simply has, but as

something each of us must create. The self is viewed as a problem, not as a given. But if we look at the self this way--not as some wordless essence but as a creature of language--then we must also confront the possibility of a language and self that is filled with nothing but commonplaces, cliches, emptiness. And so a tension between style and dogma--between those uses of language that somehow form and express a self and those that are no more than, well, language--runs throughout the works of both. For Barthes, the worst sort of writing was the closed work, the well-made text of a Balzac or Racine, whose meanings have become so plain and accepted that there is little left for its reader to do--no ambiguities for him to guess at, no insights to tease out of hiding. Indeed, the thrust of Barthes finest work, S/Z, was to show that the genius of Balzac lay not so much in describing what was real as in stringing together the cliches and maxims of his day into an apparently seamless text. As Barthes notes, Balzac often seems to be writing as if on his desk were: "A History of Literature, a History of Art, a History of Europe, an Outline of Practical Medicine, a Treatise on Psychology, an Ethics, a Logic, a Rhetoric, and an anthology of maxims and proverbs about life, death, suffering, love, women, ages of man, etc." He then goes on to comment that: "Although

entirely derived from books, these codes. . . appear to establish reality, 'Life.' 'Life,' then. . . becomes a nauseating mixture of common opinions, a smothering layer of received ideas" (1974, pp. 205-06). Such writing--which recycles ideas and phrases without ever questioning their validity or aptness--is only too familiar to most of us, since it is the essence of the English theme, that peculiar brand of schoolwriting in which the sole object of the writer is to cast the most innocuous (and thus unexceptionable) of thoughts into the most bland and acceptable of formats. For Barthes, the question of style was how to do something besides such a recycling of truisms and cliches, how to forge something new out of a language which is never wholly our own, which always comes to us secondhand, its forms and meanings set and used by countless others before us. What he came to value, then, was unorthodoxy: writing which resisted being read too easily, whose meanings and voices were too many and complex to be reduced to a single point or moral or explanation.

Similarly, the whole force of Coles' thought is against what he names Themewriting--that impersonal and often grandiosely vague prose written "inside a vacuum from which all living concerns are carefully excluded" (1978, p. 18).

The problem with such writing, for the writer, is that it threatens to obliterate experience, much as Barthes accuses Balzac of doing, by wrapping it in cliches. As Coles argues in Teaching Composing:

> Where for me now are all those rich experiences I must have had in the fourth or fifth grade? Where are all those lesser known Shakespeare plays that I've read but was never 'made' to write papers on and never talked over with anyone? Why is it that when I go tiptoeing back through a diary I kept in school and come upon the entry: 'With Marilyn tonight: the greatest yet'--I can no more remember that night than I can what was great about it? . . . . To go through life Themewriting my experience into bloodless abstractions--we had a swell time; she was really cool; it was a great trip--is to end up finally with a great deal of that life having trickled through my fingers. (1974, p.36)

The sort of pedagogy suggested by Barthes' writings is one in which we continually ask our students to look at the languages--that is, beliefs, values, assumptions--that they bring to the forming of their texts, as well as to look for those points in their writing which do actually seem singular, unexpected, more than a shuffling of received ideas. One way of going about this is Coles' practice of having his students write numerous short papers in which they're not only asked to consider various ways of seeing an issue, but to reflect upon their own previous writings as well, to rethink stances they've taken, to modify voices they've assumed. By so raising the issue of voice, as it is

shown in their own writings, Coles invites his students to look at the self as plastic, open to change, as something a writer molds as he plays with and tests the limits of his language.

The worry of most teachers of writing has traditionally been to get their students to turn out acceptable prose, to master the forms of standard written English. Coles' aim is the opposite: To have his students to develop their own styles, to push beyond or break the formulas and conventions they have already learned too well. Barthes wrote of how it was the gaps in a text--those points where the writer's meaning was uncertain, ambiguous--that most interested him. (See, for instance, The Pleasure of the Text, 1978.) And the sort of writing that Coles most often praises is that which forces its reader to go back, to reread, to rethink what it might or might not imply. None of this is talk that fits in well with the familiar and countless textbook demands for Clarity and Coherence, Readability and Structure, or with the more faddish rephrasing of those demands as a call for Reader-Based Prose. For what Barthes and Coles argue against, in the end, is a functionalist view of writing--that is, a view of writing as merely communication, merely a vehicle for sending out ideas and feelings, merely a tool.

There are in the teaching of writing two common approaches to the question of style. One--which associates style with proper usage--trivializes it; the other--which equates style with integrity--sanctimonizes it. Barthes and Coles offer us a view of style based on neither correctness nor sincerity but on complexity. In viewing the self as a kind of incredibly complex text, as a creation of language whose meanings are constantly shifting and evolving, they help us lend substance to the cliche that style is the man. For by insisting that the 'I' of the writer is not something that he brings to his text, but is rather something that is composed within its phrasings, they show us the dialectic of writing and the self: We are what our languages make of us, and what we can make of our languages.

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